

A Prescription for Health. 1 Peter 4:7-11

The Year's End

Last Sunday, PC – Pe- Christmas, we reflected on how we were feeling as 2021 came to an end – using words like – weary, uncertain, thankful, and we remembered that we can give thanks to God whatever our circumstances because His steadfast love endures forever.

And it is also useful as 2021 comes to an end and we are about to launch into 2022 to think about how we are going as a congregation.

Again, thankful comes to mind. We have in large measure been preserved, and we have experienced God's kindness throughout the year through the gifts He has given us in each other. We acknowledged that last Sunday morning, but wasn't the carols, again, an experience of how God enriches our common life through giving such varied gifts to His people – from welcoming to PA, visual illusionists to musicians, cleaning to speaking the gospel.

Thankful

But we could also use words like 'stressed' and even 'wounded', stressed by being unable to meet together for so long, wounded by a divided re-opening, wounded because of the wounds we have received as individuals.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:26 that when one part of the body of Christ which is the Christian congregation suffers, all the members suffer with it.

And there has been suffering – mental anguish for some, impaired grieving for others, sickness, isolation, disrupted schooling, difficulty with work, isolation

We come to the end of the year a little wounded and tearing the muscle in my calf last Friday week has given me opportunity to reflect on the effect of a wound in one part of your body.

You're slowed down, your movement, responses are hampered

Other parts of the body get stressed by unaccustomed use as you try and compensate for the part that is not working. Limp along too long and the hip starts to complain

You have an increased sense of vulnerability, and with it an increased caution – even with things you do all the time like driving

And if you are not aware, you can cause occasional bursts of pain.

Wounded - Slowed down, cautious, feeling stress in unusual places as you work them harder

That's one of the ways you can describe us at the end of 2021

Having lost much of the momentum we had at the beginning of 2020, almost two years ago now.

So what can we do about it?

How can we restore and maintain congregational health, rebuild that gospel momentum where people are becoming believers and being baptised, we are confidently giving ourselves to service, growing in understanding of God's will and in lives rich in doing good that honours our God?

Well, rest is part of it, and I am hoping that we all get rest in some form over this coming January.

But after a wound rest alone won't rebuild strength and function – you need more, a prescription, perhaps an exercise regime, that will build you up and keep you strong

And in God's providence that is what He gives us in today's passage, 1 Peter 4:7-11 – His prescription to restore and maintain our health as the body of Christ here, the exercise regime we are to follow.

And it starts, like most exercise that's a little challenging, with what is going on in our heads, with getting our thinking right

1 Peter 4:7 The end of all things is near; therefore, be alert and sober-minded for prayer.

Thinking rightly about our times. 4:7a

The end of all things. Peter has spoken a little about the awesome end of this age, of the old heaven and earth – for it is the end of all things – all this ages powers, structures, routines – already. He has spoken of the salvation ready to be revealed at the last time, of the Lord Jesus being revealed in glory, as this time as the last times. [1:5, 7, 20; 2:12; 4:13, 5:1]

The end of all things is when the Lord Jesus will be revealed in glory and every knee bow before Him, when all are gathered for judgment, when this age and all that is evil is consumed by fire and the new heaven and earth revealed, and the people of the Lord Jesus raised to everlasting life.

And as we will see the end of all things for Peter is something to be glad about, to long for – not something to be anxious about. A reason for living well, not for giving up and withdrawing, just looking after yourself, like preppers.

But what does he mean by 'near'. I mean it is now more than 1900 years since Peter wrote that and the end hasn't arrived. Did he get it wrong, and if he was wrong about this, is he wrong about everything else?

No.

When Peter is talking about the end being near he is not talking about a quantity of time, a number of years, but a timetable. We don't know whether Peter would be personally surprised to see us still meeting all these years later, but that would not affect what he said. Near means that Christ's return is the next thing on God's timetable. Now that Christ has come, died, risen, ascended and poured out His Spirit there is no other stop on that timetable before the end.

Peter is communicating a theological judgement, not a calculation – a theological judgement based on who He knows Jesus to be and what He knows the Lord Jesus to have done.

From the Old Testament Peter had learnt that God would bring the age to come, the new heaven and earth where people would dwell in God's presence at peace with God. This would happen when God sent His Messiah who would rescue God's people, defeat their enemies, restore Israel, establish an eternal reign. He would usher in the time when God would pour out His Spirit on them, raise the dead, bring the final judgment.

And then the Lord Jesus had come, preaching that the reign of God was near. Peter had confessed him to be the Christ, God's promised King, and the Lord Jesus had taught Peter to see in His cross the defeat of all the enemies of God's people – sin, death, the devil, and Peter had seen Him risen from the dead and entering into His eternal reign at God's right hand, confirmed by His pouring out of the Spirit on His people, and then sending the gospel, the good news of His victory, into all the world.

Peter knew that Jesus was the Christ, His victory sure, His reign established, His people even now given the Spirit of God, and that all that remained was for the Lord Jesus to be revealed from heaven in glory when the end would come. Beyond the triumph of the Christ there was no other major event to happen in God's timetable.

The end was near, the next thing.

And Peter, taught by Jesus, knew that end could never be a matter of calculation.

He had heard the Lord Jesus say of His coming "Now concerning that day and hour no one knows – neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son – except the Father alone." Matt. 24:36 – that the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus, would come like a thief in the night, come 'at an hour you do not expect'.

The end was near – certain, but its timing unknown, and so God's people must always be ready for what they know is sure to happen even if they don't know, can't know, the exact time.

That the end is near and that the way we are to think about our times is the last days is the perspective of the New Testament, and so of all believers.

Consider *Romans 13*: ¹¹ Besides this, since you know the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over, and the day is near; so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Or *James 5*: ⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.

This is the way we are to think – the end is near, and we are now living in the last days.

And that also tells us something about the character of our age. This is an age that has rejected its King, where many still live in rebellion against Christ and God, an age where the devil knows his time is short [Rev. 12:12; Matt. 24:4-14]. That will show in the kind of things Peter and his hearers were experiencing – in suffering for doing good; needing to defend our beliefs, and especially our hope; believers being subjected to foolish criticism; being treated with suspicion by those whose lifestyle is different; and sometimes to the fiery trial of direct persecution [4:12, 5:7-8]. A world where believers will always be resident aliens, sojourners, never fully at home, often under pressure for their following of Christ. An age where our Lord says because of the increase in lawlessness 'the love of many will grow cold' Matt. 24:12

Peter is about to go on and tell us how we can live well as a community of God's people in this age, live well in light of the nearness of the end, but before we look at that – let's pause

Pause to ask – how would my life, my thinking and actions, be different if I took the nearness of the end of all things seriously [2 Cor. 5:10]?

We are bible believers, so when we hear Peter say "the end of all things is near" – we agree, but it is an abstraction for many of us, without emotional force.

What if we really believed the time was very close when Lord Jesus will be revealed in glory and we will give account for our service; if we really believed that nothing here – relationships, career achievement, possessions, - is ultimate. That the things we invest so much in, labour for, that we measure our success or failure of our lives by – money, property, degrees, family, respect of others, will soon pass away, and only what we build on the rock, what we do in obedience to our Lord, will last.

Would believing the end is near make a difference to what you think of yourself, your goals, achievement, choices, to what you gave yourself to do?

If you thought you would soon be explaining to the Lord Jesus why you had used his time and money, the life and gifts He has given you, in the way you are using them – would you make different choices?

The end of one year and the beginning of the next – that's a good time to ask yourself those questions.

And God in His kindness tells us here how we should be living as a congregation in light of the nearness of the end – so you can measure what you are doing against how God says you should live.

1 Peter 4:⁷ The end of all things is near; therefore, be alert and sober-minded for prayer.

Embracing God's will for our times

Therefore We should have a certain mindset that shows itself in prayer

Prayer

WE are to be 'alert' – the sense of the word translated alert is more right minded. It is the word used to describe the Gerasene demoniac when he is healed, sitting at the feet of Jesus – clothed and in his right mind' Mk 5:15. It describes someone who keeps their head, is reasonable, serious

And sober minded is someone who is clear minded, not intoxicated or governed by passions.

[Opposite of 4:3]

Peter is calling us to think clearly in ways informed by the truth of who Jesus is and what HE has done, that reckons soberly with the nearness of the end. It is not a time to let our thinking be clouded by thinking this world is ultimate or permanent, or that there will be no accounting for how we live our lives.

And the purpose or result of this clear thinking is that we will give ourselves to prayer. Notice that – thinking clearly about the nearness of the end doesn't mean we become pre-occupied with useless calculation. It doesn't mean we run around like chicken littles crying the sky is falling. It doesn't mean we abandon work to prompt the coming of the new age.

The priority for those thinking clearly about the end – is prayer.

Peter doesn't say what we should be praying for individually and as a congregation. But the rest of the New Testament gives us direction on that – praying for the Lord's return [Luke 18:1-8, Rev. 22:17,20], praying for boldness in speaking the gospel [Acts 4:, Eph. 6:19], for His people to be kept through trial, for growth in godliness, for our enemies

But thinking clearly about the end means we pray, pray because the living almighty God hears our prayers and can both sustain us through and bring to an end 'this present evil age.'

Over the lockdowns some of us have been renewed in our habits of daily prayer, helped by the prayer and devotion emails. Don't give up. A return to some kind of normal shouldn't mean we become too busy to pray. The end is near, so now is no time to be half-hearted about prayer. That would mean we have lost clarity of thought

And to live well in this time as a congregation is to pray. I know the prayer meeting can disrupt our growth groups and it is hard to build participation when we are all online, but we hope to return to most of us being in the building, and our collective prayer says we know what time it is, and we are depending on God to do His work, and bring His Saviour.

Because the end of all things is near, we pray, and we commit ourselves to love.

*1 Peter 4:⁸ Above all, maintain constant love for one another, since **love covers a multitude of sins.**
⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*

Love [John 13:34-35, 15:12-14; 1 John 3:11; Prov. 10:12 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 4:19]

Because of the pressure of the last days our Lord warns us love can grow cold, and we see in the church of Ephesus in Revelation that you can be a faithful church, doctrinally correct, and have lost love

But in these times love must be a priority for God's people

Above all, before all things, love 'constantly'

Our love is to be determined and persevering. We are to be unwavering in our love of our brothers and sisters.

Not on again, off again but something our brothers and sisters can rely on when they live in a world that is suspicious of them, that is pressuring them to pull back from doing good and being faithful to Jesus

The love of their Christian family that will comfort and provide

Peter highlights one particular reason why love for our brothers and sisters in the congregation must be constant, persevering,

For '**love covers a multitude of sins**'

Peter is quoting Proverbs 10:12, and the full Proverb reads:

*Prov. 10: Hatred stirs up conflicts,
but love covers all offenses.*

It was so encouraging to hear the Coates and Landreth's speak last Sunday, to speak of being received with love.

But the reality is that we continue to be a group of sinners, and in a group of sinners we will, from time to time, wrong each other, disappoint each other, misunderstand each other, sometimes treat people differently

When that happens, and it is when, not if – we need to deal with it by repentance and forgiveness

But what we don't do is give up on each other, we don't exclude or separate – we persevere in real relationships, and can do that because of the love that covers a multitude of sins.

Love doesn't keep bringing up those failings. It covers them over. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs – and it stops our hurt becoming solidified into relationship breaking bitterness and anger, or a harping criticism that will drive others away.

Love does this because we want our brothers and sisters good, we want them to persevere in the faith, and we know that being in the congregation helps them to do that and driving them into the world by our lovelessness will harm them

Love does that because we know our brothers and sisters are precious – loved by Jesus, those for whom He died.

And love does that because we know we are loved, that the Lord Jesus has brought us into His family and keeps us in His family because in His love He has given His shed blood to cover over all our offences, to remove them from God's sight.

If we are to recover from the wounding of lockdown we need this love, and, brothers and sisters, it is a deliberate decision to practice it

To hang in – to come back to loving others, not just in our own small circle but all our brothers and sisters, not just those we have chosen, but those Jesus has chosen. Lockdown may have shrunk temporarily those we could meet with, but we mustn't let it shrink our hearts. Re-engage with loving all Jesus' people

And a deliberate decision to overlook the way others might have disappointed us in lockdown, lost touch with us, even, we think, forgotten us.

WE love because Jesus has loved us, and He calls us, first of all, above all, to love those He loves – perseveringly.

And as an expression of that love Peter calls us to ⁹*Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*

Hospitality

What did being hospitable involve for Peter's first hearers?

One aspect of it which we know from early Christian writing of the late first and early second centuries like the Didache was putting up overnight travelling gospel preachers, missionaries, and the emissaries of church.

The inns of the time were notoriously bad – unhealthy, often associated with theft, drunkenness and prostitution. Christians avoided them, relying instead on the hospitality of fellow believers. The hosts did not know them but still they received them as fellow believers, on the road to do the Lord's will.

Hospitality in this case involved having strangers in your house at short notice, eating your food, sharing your facilities.

The other aspect of hospitality, particularly if people had means, was hosting the meeting of the local church. There were no church buildings so if the congregation was to gather it had to be in someone's place. That gathering was so important for knowing other believers, giving mutual encouragement, learning the faith.

Yet it was definitely intrusive, probably inconvenient because the meeting was either before or after the working day, drew on one's resources, and involved people you may not know or who were of a completely different social class coming to your place

Yet Peter calls on believers to keep showing hospitality 'without complaining' or 'grumbling'. That was the word used of the Israelites complaining about God's arrangement of things in the wilderness, whether it was lack of meat or his plan to invade Caanan. [Ex. 16:2, 7-12, Num. 11:1, 14:27-29, 16:41, 17:5].

Grumbling is saying God hasn't got it right in the way He has organised life and He doesn't care about you, that what he expects is a little unrealistic and thoughtless.

It is serious

Hospitality, having people in your home, sharing what God has given you with your brothers and sisters, is God's will

Whether that is hosting a growth group, taking the initiative to connect people over a meal, having the youth group – or parts of it – over, or hosting a Christianity explored;

Or making sure a fellow believer has a roof over their head when times are tough

It all contributes to the perseverance of the congregation as a distinct community of believers marked out by love, and can, like first century believers hosting travellers, contribute to the spread of the gospel

It is work. It can put you out. You may not know all the people well.

But we do it without grumbling because it is our good Lord's will, and we know in showing hospitality to our brothers and sisters we are showing hospitality to the Lord Jesus.

Remember Matthew 25.

Our Lord said to the sheep, those who will enter into eternal life, I was a stranger, and you took me in. And they said "When did we see you a stranger and take you in"

And our Lord said "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Wouldn't you be delighted to show hospitality to the Lord Jesus?

He says you can.

How to be a healing and healthy community in the last days?

Prayer

Love

Hospitality

And service.

1 Peter 4:¹⁰ *Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God.*¹¹ *If anyone speaks, let it be as one who speaks God's words; if anyone serves, let it be from the strength God provides, so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

Service

Here is the starting point - Each one of us has received a gift from God's grace, and all called to serve, to use their gift to serve others. [1 Cor. 12:7, 11, 12-14]

Peter doesn't list gifts here – in fact he groups them all into two categories, speaking and serving.

That is because he is focused on our attitude to our gifts, and the manner and goal of everyone's service.

You can find list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, but as you look at them remember those lists are descriptive of the gifts in Corinth and Rome, not prescriptive of the gifts all churches must have.

Any ability in a believer, someone who confesses Jesus as Lord, that is or can be used to build up God's people, would be reckoned as a gift of God's grace to His people, and those abilities extend far beyond those listed in the New Testament.

We have seen in our congregation, and been blessed by, God's gracious gifts to us of musicians, people with tech know-how, ability in plumbing, air con, computer skills, relating to children as well as gifts of service, mercy, administration, encouragement, teaching, evangelism – in God's kindness the list is endless

God has given us all something that can be used to build up His people

But how should we think about those gifts, how should we use them, and to what end?

Well says Peter, we have to think of ourselves as stewards of something entrusted to us by God.

A steward is not the owner.

They are people entrusted by the owner with some responsibility.

In English a steward is most often someone entrusted with the care of a property or household. They have to care for it or operate it according to the owners instructions, knowing they are accountable to the owner for how they have used, looked after, what belongs to the owner. The one thing that is looked for in a steward, says Paul, is faithfulness – doing what the owner has instructed her or him to do, not being lazy in caring for what belongs to our Master.

The gifts we have are not our own, they have been entrusted to us by God, to be used God's way.

And God's word says they are to be used to serve others, not for self, for our benefit or glory. By these gifts God has made provision for the welfare and growth of His people, and they are to be used for the welfare and growth of His people.

So using your gift is not about your satisfaction or enjoyment, but about whether the Lord will be satisfied by your service of others with your gift. You are not doing your brothers and sisters a favour by using your gift for their benefit. You are showing you have received favour, grace, from God, and

you look to Him, not those you serve, for your reward. That is why you persevere, even when thankless or unnoticed.

We are to think of ourselves as stewards

And Peter then talks about the manner in which we serve, grouping all the gifts in two categories

¹¹ If anyone speaks, let it be as one who speaks God's words; if anyone serves, let it be from the strength God provides,

If anyone speaks – teachers, evangelists, but you could also think of Growth Group leaders, Sunday school and youth group leaders, parents teaching their children God's word.

They have to do it 'as one who speaks God's words'. This is not saying we speak as if we have direct revelation from God. Peter is speaking about manner, not content. But he is saying that the way we speak and teach God's word has to be consistent with what it is, the word of the living God. So we shouldn't be mixing in our own insights and speculations with it, but keeping it distinct, as it is. And we should speak with a suitable seriousness and zeal, as if it matters how people hear and respond, for it does matter. We should never trivialise it, nor be offhand or unprepared. We should use our gift knowing we are sharing the Word of the living God.

And then he speaks of those who serve – again very general, but it could include those who do acts of mercy, or provide administration, or serve – or those who serve with IT or PA, with cleaning or on the Board. They should serve 'from the strength God provides'.

But as with speaking, this is speaking about the manner of our service, not the source – which we already know is from the gift of God's grace. WE are to serve 'as one who' serves with the strength God supplies'

What does that say of the manner of our service? It means we go about our service with a cheerful wholeheartedness, knowing we serve the God who can, as HE did with the bread and fishes, take our small resources and make them sufficient to do what is asked. It is asking us not to be anxious about our service, not resentful of the drain on our resources, and not being defensive, fearful that what God calls us to with the gift He provides will overwhelm us.

It doesn't mean we always say yes – for other things may be happening in our lives. It doesn't mean we should think ourselves omniscient, fit for anything, for He is talking about serving with our gifts.

But it does mean our service is to flow from trust in Him, not trust in our own competency, and our manner of service should match that confidence in God.

And when we serve God's people with the gifts God supplies in the manner God commands knowing we are accountable to God, then

God [will] may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

That is the goal of our service. That in whatever way they are blessed by the use of the gifts God gives to serve them the praise and thanks be given to God, His reputation enhanced, that people grow in their knowledge and confidence in God's goodness and power.

That is what we want to see happen through our common life, by the character of our Christian community, by its prayerfulness, love, hospitality, service of each other with what God has entrusted to us, that our God be glorified through Jesus Christ.

Through Jesus Christ – and it can only be through Jesus Christ, for it is only through believing in Jesus that we have

Confidence in prayer

Come to know His love which is the source and measure of our love for each other

That we receive the Spirit and the gifts distributed by Him

And Peter finishes by reminding us of Jesus' greatness, that to Him *To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

And that is consistent with the goal of our service, for glory is given to God when we honour and glorify the Lord Jesus.

Those who sing in heaven of the Lamb

Are singing praise of God, for their glory is inseparable [Rev. 5:13]

Rev. 5:13

The Prescription for our times

Thinking rightly about our times, and embracing the life of those who think rightly – the life of prayer, love, generous hospitality, and service

The prescription we need, the exercise regime we need – to restore and maintain our health after the wounding of the last two years

A life that brings glory to our God

Right life for those who know the end is near,

For all those who know Jesus and what God has done and is doing in Jesus

A Life motivated by knowing God's grace to us in Christ – knowing His love, our access to Him, His generosity to us

The question is Will we take the prescription, gratefully and diligently.

I used to write prescriptions as a doctor, knowing that some never filled them out, some would take the medicine for a while and then stop before the prescribed course ran out, some would take the tablets occasionally when they felt the need even though prescribed for regular consumption, and some would fill the script and put the pills in the cupboard for a rainy day, or for a more deserving relative.

But this prescription isn't from a fallible doctor, and it is not for a temporary need.

This is the way God wants His people to live together

This time next year – praising God

Been diligent in prayer

Embraced in love

Blessed by Hospitable brothers and sisters

Served with the gifts God has given to each one of us

Pray it will be so – but like every feature of our life together – it is up to each of us

Want God glorified through Jesus